

PSYCHOLOGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE: COLLECTIVE SOLUTIONS TO A GLOBAL PROBLEM¹

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On Thursday, September 23, 2010, Professor David Uzzell, Professor of Environmental Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Surrey, presented this year's joint British Academy and British Psychology Society annual lecture at the Royal Society's Lecture Hall in London. The title of the talk was one that should interest anyone keenly involved in the climate debate: "Psychology and climate: Collective solutions to a global problem." Professor Uzzell was appointed as the UK's first Professor of Environmental Psychology in 2000.

I spoke to him ahead of his lecture and asked him to summarise its themes:

Psychology has a lot to offer the climate change debate. To date, the emphasis from psychologists has largely focused on behaviour-change strategies. This makes sense: if you are interested in changing people's personal behaviour, a psychologist is probably the person you need to speak to. But my concern over the last few years is just how effective this is. It is effective up to a point, but is it really going to bring in the returns that we need to address the very serious problems of climate change?

My line is that we can try to change behaviour, but it might be more effective to change the conditions that encourage our behaviours. There is a debate being had within psychology that we should aim for environmentally significant behaviour as opposed to environmentally convenient behaviour. Not focusing on turning lights off, etc., but instead concentrating on things such as buying energy-efficient appliances.

But I would take this further: psychologists now need to work with other disciplines, such as engineering, sociology, etc. We need to have a much better understanding of the conditions which lead to unsustainable behaviour. It's no good the government saying to us that for journeys less than a mile you should walk or use public transport because when you are trying to juggle demands, such as your job and children within limited time, you are probably going to take your car. We need to change the conditions rather than attack individual behaviours.

There's been a lot of finger-wagging and people resent that. They also notice the contradictions. One of the things that came out of a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs survey in 2007 was that we would do more if the government did more. We see double standards. People also need feedback on how they're doing. People need to know explicitly what the benefits are of what they are being asked to do. People are not interested in concepts such as "saving the planet" or "doing it for their grandchildren." People want impacts that are concrete, immediate and personal to them. They need to see how it's benefiting them. If they are being asked to make - what they see in their terms, at least - as a sacrifice, they need to see what the benefit is to them.

Much of this might seem like basic common sense, but Uzzell says he will also talk about why people choose to "distance" themselves from climate change:

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Work over the past 15 years or so has shown that people think the environment is worse the further away it is from them. We've seen the same results in Britain, Slovakia, Australia, and Ireland. We've done it with children, with urban people, rural people. We consistently get the same results. The problem - both cause and effect - is always somewhere else.

We've also found that people think the problems will be worse in the future. And when we ask what the causes of the environmental problems are we get interesting results. If you ask people to rank causes, you find the highest scores for 'inaction by government' or the 'actions of industries.' You also see the 'industrialisation of developing countries,' the 'poverty of developing countries,' and 'overpopulation' as ranking highly. Overall, what you see is a tendency to distance the causes from themselves.

Rejecting climate change as a problem is, in a way, a coping strategy. Another aspect is that recent events, such as the UEA e-mails affair, the failure of COP15 at Copenhagen, etc., give people a convenient reason to discount climate change as a threat. It gives them a permission to deny. We shouldn't be surprised that people see climate change as remote and impersonal to them. We shouldn't be talking about how our lives will become somehow poorer through climate change, but instead be talking about it could help us to become healthier, happier and enable us to live in a better environment.

Ultimately, we have to present alternatives and opportunities. If there is no other genuine option than to drive your car, then people will continue to drive. We know as psychologists that people are resistant to change so we must address this.

By coincidence, a new paper entitled *The Psychology of Global Warming*, has just been published in the *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*. The two authors - Professor Andy Pitman, co-director of the Climate Change Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, and Dr Ben Newell, senior lecturer in cognitive psychology at the University of New South Wales – make the observation:

Simply presenting the facts and figures about global warming has failed to convince large portions of the general public, journalists, and policy makers about the scale of the problem and the urgency of required action. From a psychologist's perspective this disconnect is not surprising.

It's fascinating to see some of the "psychological phenomenon" that the authors highlight to help explain why so many people chose to reject climate change as a risk. I'll list their headings here:

- Psychological non-equivalence of mathematically equivalent information
- Influence of affective processing of information
- Discounting the importance of future events
- The differential impact of losses and gains
- Construction of mental models for representing problems
- Reliance on confirmatory evidence

In conclusion, the authors also present four examples of "food for thought" to any climate scientist wishing to disseminate their findings to the wider community:

- (1) Sampling issues: clarity about the source and representativeness of samples of evidence that your audience and you are using to form inferences and draw conclusions.

- (2) Framing issues: methods for presenting science should engage cognitive and emotional processing, in a balanced manner, and try to make distant future outcomes concrete.
- (3) Comprehending the problem and solution: communicators should take into account the "mental model" held by members of their audience and tailor presentations accordingly.
- (4) Consensus building: the process and public perception of reaching a consensus about the science needs to be effective, transparent, and objective.

Food for thought, indeed.